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ABSTRACT

To explore in-service elementary teachers' selection of children's literature and the factors influencing that selection, a study surveyed 55 public and independent elementary teachers (K-7) from urban, suburban, and rural settings in Massachusetts, Oregon, and Wisconsin about their recent experiences in selecting children's books for use in their classrooms during the 1987-1988 school year. Teachers completed written surveys identifying (1) three children's books they had used as part of their students' educational programs during the past year; (2) the books' authors; (3) the books' main characters; (4) reasons for the selection of each book; and (5) the number of years of teaching experience and current grade level taught. Findings revealed that teachers' selection of children's literature resulted from the appropriateness of the text within a larger instructional unit; personal preference for the book because of the story, author, illustrations, or award-winning status; and recognition of gender, race, and ethnicity as important elements in the book. Findings confirm that a "selective tradition" in teachers' choices (in which teachers select books that reflect their own cultural values) still exists. (Seven references are attached.) (MM)

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The Selective Tradition: Does It Exist in the Contemporary Elementary Classroom?

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Introduction:

Of all the curricular decisions an elementary teacher needs to make, the selection and reading of children's books would seem among the easiest to resolve since, on the surface, the procedure appears to involve little more than choosing a well-known, well-liked, or well-recommended text for use at a given grade level. The matter is not so simple, however, and at the moment, teachers' selection of children's books for classroom use is probably attracting as much attention and controversy as any other curricular issue in elementary education.

While questions regarding the choice of children's books are certainly not new -- an older generation of educators was long concerned, for example, with issues of book suitability, age-appropriateness, and "match" -- a newer generation of educational sociologists and curriculum theorists, drawing on a decade of research in literary criticism at the higher educational level, has begun to describe the existence of a "selective tradition" in elementary teachers' choice of literature in instructional settings (Taxel, 1981; Wald, 1981; Williams, 1977).

This selective tradition reflects the view that the very process of choosing certain literary works for classroom use involves the simultaneous exclusion of others. And, since books both embody and play a crucial role in transmitting particular systems of sociocultural values, beliefs, and attitudes, teachers -- as they make their choices of children's books -- essentially "select" for or against the existence of such cultural values in their classrooms. In describing the nature of this selective

process further, Taxel (1981) and others have argued that too frequently such choices disregard or exclude literary works for school study that are by and about women, ethnic minorities, people of color, and certain social classes in favor of books featuring predominately white, Euro-American, male authors and subjects. That such selection diminishes the legitimacy of one group in favor of another and presents students with an ideologically biased, culturally exclusive, and false view of society has also been compellingly argued (Apple, 1978, 1981; Fetterley, 1978; Taxel, 1981).

While literary theorists, educators, and curriculum specialists have carefully outlined the conceptual aspects of the selective tradition over the past few years, only minimal research has investigated how the process of selectivity/exclusion actually occurs in teachers' choices of literary works in the elementary classroom. In perhaps the most valuable empirical study to date, Luke, Cooke, and Luke (1986) asked Australian student teachers to select a single children's book that they thought children would like and benefit from. Analysis of book choices indicated that "most students had not considered gender or race of author or character in their selection at all" (p. 214) and that student teachers' selections were "predominately written by and about Anglo-European males, and the characterization of male and female characters was extremely conventional and stereotypical" (p. 213). As a result of these findings, Luke, et. al. conclude that "in all, the survey results indicate unconscious gender and racial bias in

student teachers' commonsense assumptions about 'what's appropriate for kids to read'" (p. 216) and "that too often the cultural/curricular selection process entails a naive, acritical adoption of texts which risks perpetuating the 'minimization, distortion, and outright exclusion' of the experience of women, particular social classes, and ethnic minorities" (p. 216).

While Luke, et. al. provide initial empirical evidence to support the theoretical view that a selective tradition exists at the elementary level, they do so only on the basis of data gathered from pre-service teachers, a population group unfortunately lacking actual classroom experience and practice -- qualities which may well inform and shape literary judgment, selection, and taste. As a result, their study raises some important questions:

1. Would in-service elementary teachers in "real" classrooms choose literary works for instructional use which also exclusively feature white, Euro-American male authors and subjects?
2. Would practicing teachers exhibit the same naive, acritical attitudes of literary selection as their less experienced counterparts when asked to identify their reasons for choosing a particular children's book for classroom use?
3. Are there any other factors -- not addressed by Luke -- which also operate to inform teachers' book selections?
4. Which of these factors exert the most influence? Why?

Data Collection:

In order to explore possible answers to these questions, the authors asked 55 public and independent elementary teachers (K-7) from urban, suburban, and rural settings in Massachusetts, Oregon, and Wisconsin to reflect on their recent experiences in selecting children's books for use in their classroom during the 1987-88 school year. The average number of years of elementary classroom teaching experience for the sample was 12.5 years, with a range of from one to forty years of instructional practice.

From May through June, 1988 teachers were asked to complete a written survey identifying

1. three children's books they used in their classrooms as part of their students' educational programs during the the past year
2. the authors of each of the books
3. the main characters of each of the books
4. the reasons for the selection of each book, and
5. the number of years of teaching experience and current grade level taught.

Findings:

The findings from the survey may may be approached in two ways, depending whether one wants a simple, tidy picture in which children's books featuring specific authors and subjects are simply tabulated quantitatively in order to reveal their cultural/ideological frames of reference, or whether one can accept a more complex, dynamic situation in which issues of children's book selection are many and the lines that separate

them are frequently blurred and complicated.

We begin with the first approach, noting that teachers selected a total of 155 books, representing 104 different authors (Several books were named more than once, and several authors were represented by more than one book.).

With regard to gender and cultural background of the 104 authors named in the survey, 57 (or 55%) were male. These male authors accounted for 91 (or 59%) or the 155 books listed by the teachers surveyed -- a percentage identical to that found by Luke et. al (1986) in their survey of pre-service teachers in Australia. In addition, 99 (or 95%) of the authors named were of Euro-American heritage. Only 5 of the chosen authors were ethnic minorities.

With regard to gender and cultural background of main characters in the books teachers named, 32 (or 20%) of the 155 books chosen were either information books without human characteristics (11), animal stories with main characters of indeterminate sex (16), or poetry collections (5). Of the 123 remaining books with identifiable main characters, 80 (or 65%) featured males as primary book characters. The representation of cultural diversity among main characters in the books selected was even more limited. Of the 123 books with identifiable main characters, only 8 (or 6%) included main characters from North American minority cultures; this number included 4 Black, 3 Native American, and 1 Japanese main character(s).

In explaining this data, one can, of course take the position

that these figures and percentages merely reflect the relative availibility of books by and about male and female authors and subjects of different cultural backgrounds in the school districts of teachers surveyed. One can also argue, however, that the data suggests that experienced teachers are not taking full advantage of those books which are increasingly being published which are by and about women and people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Whatever the case, when tabulated quantitatively, the results from our survey of in-service elementary school teachers clearly confirm the findings by Luke et. al. and offer empirical support for the existence of a selective tradition in experienced elementary teachers' choices of children's literature in the contemporary American classroom.

A much more complex and dynamic picture emerges from the data in this study, however, when one goes beyond simple numerical tabulation of book choices and begins to review the reasons teachers gave for selecting the books they did. We found that teachers surveyed in this study offered a variety of reasons for adopting particular books. As we looked at their rationales, we began to find that many teachers considered a variety of interrelated, often competing factors in deciding which children's book to use in their classrooms. Teachers frequently described a complex network of multiple personal and curricular issues and interrelationships among the children in their classrooms, their specific curricular needs, and the book selection process. From many teachers' perspectives, the

selection of a literary work was not an isolated decision; rather, choice was deeply embedded in and integrated into the context of a dynamic social setting (their classrooms) and into the context of larger curricular issues which included considerations of how to present a given unit of material in a thoughtful, meaningful way.

In all, teachers gave 170 reasons for selecting particular books (Several teachers offered multiple explanations for selecting a given text, thus generating a greater number of reasons for choosing 155 books.). From these individual teacher responses, three major categories of response emerged; teachers selected books because of 1) the appropriateness of the text within a larger instructional context, 2) personal preference for the book because of the story, author, illustrations, or award-winning status, and 3) the recognition of gender, race, and ethnicity as important elements in the books selection process. In the following sections, we explore each of these categories, offering examples of the words of teachers themeselves in order to reveal the thought and reasoning underlying the decisions they made.

1. Instructional/Curricular Factors:

The importance of selecting a children's book within a larger instructional context was the primary reason teachers gave for choosing the books they did, mentioning this factor 79 times (or 47%). This category included two somewhat overlapping groups: one relating book choice to unit content (37 comments, or 22 %),

the other relating book choice to a specific curricular skill (42 comments, or 25%).

In the former group, some teachers were very succinct in describing the book selection process. A fourth grade teacher with 8 years of experience explained her line of reasoning for choosing the book, How to Eat Fried Worms:

"It fits well into my predicting consequences health unit";

while a kindergarten teacher with 18 years experience commented on her choice of The Very Hungry Caterpillar:

"We have been studying the life cycle of the caterpillar. We started with caterpillars, then cocoons, and finally beautiful butterflies. The story tied in beautifully."

Several of the teachers provided more extensive commentary, and their responses reflected thoughtful, sophisticated attempts to integrate children's literature within unit material. A second grade teacher articulately described how she integrated two children's books into her science unit on Oceans in order to provide her students with a richer framework for appreciating and discussing unit content, as well as the interconnectedness and caring relationships among a community of very different living creatures:

"Swimmy was excellent for an Ocean unit showing survival and working together. Several fish swim together in schools to fool larger fish. A discussion and art project followed using sponge painting and tissue paper."

She also reported using Titus Tidewater as "another excellent book for the Ocean unit. We had just traveled to Mystic [a

Massachusetts seaport] and learned more about tide pools. This gave children another opportunity to see the other animals in a tide pool but most important it talked about caring and taking care of others."

In a similar vein, a first grade teacher with four years' experience related using Mary Ann Hoberman's A House is A House For Me and incorporating it "into a Social Studies unit on houses, Children were able to focus on house forms for many different things. Also led to a creative brainstorming of ideas. Read in a big book form -- enjoyed choral reading. Predictable text."

A fifth grade teacher who selected 3 children's books -- Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Where the Lilies Bloom, and The Red Pony -- for use in her class's long-term unit on United States Regions, also chose Adam of the Road by Elizabeth Janet Gray for integration into a different thematic unit during the year. She wrote:

"This book was chosen for its accurate portrayal of life during the Medieval times. The main character loses his father during a fair and has his dog stolen so he must travel alone to many different towns, monasteries, and castles to find them. The novel's flavor of medieval life and use of a child as a main character (to make it more relevant to 5th graders - they can more easily associate and compare/contrast life styles) makes this a good historical fiction choice to be used when we study that time period."

As previously mentioned, 42 teachers chose a particular

children's book becasue it provided a richer, more contextually meaningful opportunity for specific skill or content instruction. A second grade teacher explained that she chose William Steig's Amos and Boris "to begin talking about descriptive words and how they are used to express a situation. Excellent to introduce synonyms."

Similarly, another first grade teacher with 12 years of experience selected Cache of Jewels because "it is a content area book on collective nouns, e.g. cache, coven, kindle, swarm . . . it is literature that focuses on a skill, nouns taught in a meaningful context."

2. Personal/Aesthetic Preference:

Almost an equal number of teachers selected children's books for personal and aesthetic reasons as for curricular ones, mentioning this factor 76 times (or 45%). Sixty-three responses (or 37%) explained that the selected text was a personal favorite of either themselves or of their students. For example, a second grade teacher with 19 years of experience stated, with reference to Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh, "I love this story and my students always do too. There are many important issues to discuss."

A fourth grade teacher with 8 years of experience commented about Wilson Rawls, "I had read Where the Red Fern Grows and loved it, so I tried another."

Another 7 responses (or 4%) indicated that they selected the book, in part, because it was an award-winner (Newbery, etc.) or

was considered a children's classic. An appreciation of the book's illustrations was mentioned 6 times (4 %) as a rationale for selecting the book. Characteristic of responses in this group were those of a first grade teacher who chose Over in the Meadow because it "had beautiful artwork" and of a second grade teacher who selected Moses the Kitten because "the illustrations by Peter Barret are heartwarming and delightful; I love cats and I always try to instill in my students a love for animals."

3. Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

Only 15 (or 9%) of the 170 responses suggested a recognition of the importance of considering gender, race, and ethnicity as factors in the book selection process. With regard to gender, 7 teachers (or 4%) specifically identified it as a reason for selecting a particular book, some of whom reported an interest in the equitable presentation of males and females. For example, a fourth grade teacher with 15 years' experience selected Danny, Champion of the World because of its "positive male role model, strong single parent family, great adventure and coming of age novel for 9-12 years. The hero shows an inner strength of character that the reader can identify with."

Similarly, she selected The Wolves of Willoughby Chase for "its positive female role model -- dealing with loss of parents, home, and love -- historical fiction with fast-paced action and adventure including villains who are outwitted by the courage of the heroine."

Several teachers expressly selected texts because the books

connected an awareness of gender issues with particular classroom and social needs. For example, a fourth grade teacher found A Bridge to Teribithia especially meaningful in portraying a sensitivity to social class differences and interpersonal relationships:

"Having both a girl and boy main character helps endure interest in this excellent book. The story emphasizes loyalty and imagination. A family with low economic income but high values is also featured. A lot of family feelings and togetherness is evident."

Other teachers commented on the importance of relating gender issues to the general curriculum. A fifth grade teacher with 13 years' experience describes Th Maude Reed Tale:

"This novel ties into our Middle Ages Unit. Its female protagonist struggles with what she is and isn't supposed to do, so it's a useful base for discussion of sex role stereotyping then and now. It contains a lot of information about the time period."

Similarly, in explaining why she uses the book, Nobody's Family is Going to Change, a sixth grade teacher with 12 years of experience stated that she selected the book as

"part of adolescent literature, taught in conjunction with our Human Growth and Change Unit. Deals imaginatively with puberty, self-esteem, over eating, sex roles, sibling rivalry, identity, and racism. Well written, very appealing characters and plot, great for discussions, projects, and role plays."

(This same teacher also indicated that this was only 1 of 4

literary texts that she selected for this unit, the others being A Day No Pigs Would Die, Summer of the Falcon, and A Bridge to Teribitha.)

Only 8 (or 5 %) of the 170 responses reflected a recognition of the importance of considering race or ethnicity in the book selection process. Many of these books represented international or historical characters rather than contemporary North American minority cultures. For example, a first grade teacher with 4 years' teaching experience explained that Mufaro's Daughters is a "good story to compare and contrast with certain oral folktales, African setting, outstanding illustrations, definite sequence of events."

Aware of the historical factor, a third grade teacher with 5 years of experience mentioned that she used The Best Bad Thing in her class because

"the heroine's family is Japanese-American and second graders have studied Japan, the main character is similar in age to third graders. Writing is very humorous and forthright, but again the setting is a stretch -- California, 1940s, heroine encounters prejudice, family struggles to survive, heroine is forced to reconsider an eccentric old woman with whom she is sent to live."

The Civil War was a catalyst for several of the book choices featuring Black Americans. A fifth grade teacher with 5 years' experience said of Sounder:

"The main character is the age of my students. He is also a Negro child which helps the students to understand that race does not make us different as humans. The story takes place in the

years following the Civil War and gives the students insight into the struggles of Black people in America."

In similar line of reasoning, a fourth grade teacher with 16 years of teaching experience chose Underground to Canada

"to give children a sense of what Black people endured during the period of slavery in the US. To stress the importance of freedom and treating people equally."

Books about Native Americans were most frequently historical accounts of the Western expansion of Euro-Americans. A fifth grade teacher with 13 years experience said about Zeb:

"This book deals with survival in the wilderness and relationships between European settlers and Native Americans, two themes central to our colonial Northampton [Massachusetts] social studies unit. It is at an appropriate reading level and students tend to enjoy it a lot."

A third grade teacher with 17 years' experience described the book, Down the Long Hills,

"Survival! Two young children stranded on the prairie must learn to survive against many dangers. I also have the movie and the children are able to compare the book and the movie. Each year they always argue that the book was better. We discuss the westward movement and how the Indians felt about the white man."

A few teachers reported a commitment to selecting children's books relevent to the cultural backgrounds of their students. A fourth grade teacher with 19 years' experience writes about Call Me Bronko:

"This book mentions a concentration camp, displaced persons,

and tells what it's like to come to a new country. The boy is from Poland. We live in a Polish community. It gives the students an idea of what the world was like when we were at war with Nazi Germany."

A sixth grade teacher in Massachusetts (for 12 years) mentioned selecting Spirit to Ride the Whirlwind:

"Wonderful re-creation of Lowell, 1830s, from the point of view of a 12 year old girl struggling to help her family, move into a factory, to rise socially. Terrific precursor for a trip to Lowell and for developing themes, i.e. child labor, economics, social classes."

Many of the teachers who reflected a sensitivity to issues of gender, race, and ethnicity in the selection of children's books did so as part of a complex curricular decision making process, focusing not on the book itself but on the context in which the selection made sense. For most teachers, this included the use of the book in a broad, instructionally based context where the sometimes abstract and pedantic course content could be enriched and enlivened by the voices and pictures from children's books.

Conclusion:

We think that two major conclusions can be drawn from the findings in this study, the first of which is important but incomplete and misleading if not viewed within the context of our second conclusion.

On the one hand, the results of this study clearly provide empirical support for the existence of an "unconscious gender and

racial bias in . . . teachers' commonsense assumptions about 'what's appropriate for kids to read'" as identified in Luke et. al.'s (1986) study of student teachers. That this bias is also characteristic of experienced elementary school teachers reflects the pervasive nature of the problem. Of critical concern is the apparent ineffectiveness of both preservice and inservice teacher education programs in overcoming the seemingly continual reproduction of, as Taxel (1981) decribes, a "biased, exclusionist, and erroneous version of history and culture."

On the other hand, however, the results of this study point to more complex considerations which suggest that teachers' selection of literature is a dynamic, complex process that involves a multiplicity of curricular, personal, aesthetic, social, as well as ideological factors -- all of which vie for teacher attention in the contemporary elementary classroom.

The fact that most teachers in this study did not consistently adopt children's books for use in their classrooms solely on the basis of ideological (i.e., representing a diversity of cultural, gender, and social class backgrounds) should not in any way depict them as being acritical or naive in making book choices. On the contrary, in reviewing the responses to our survey, we noted that many teachers demonstrated a keen level of professional awareness and responsiveness to the multi-faceted nature of curriculum decision making as they attempted to weave together into coherent patterns their unique concerns about the needs of their children, their specific curricular goals about what to teach (or what is required to be taught), and their

selection of appropriate instructional materials -- which, to their credit, frequently included the integration of a wide array of children's literature across the curriculum in novel and meaningful ways.

Viewed from this broader, contextually-based perspective, we do not disagree with the recent scholarship which recommends that ideological concerns are important criteria for teachers to consider in the selection of literature for classroom use. What we do suggest, however, is that such concerns find their fullest meaning only when addressed -- not singularly and in a decontextualized fashion -- but as one important factor embedded within an intricate, dynamic relationship of many other important factors which, taken as a whole, constitute the basis for the definition and on-going refinement of teachers' literary choice.

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